

Sweeney Among the Nightingales:

T.S. Eliot's Influence on British Writers of the Nineteen-Thirties

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## PREFACE

It is my intention in this short work to draw out the similarities and connections which exist between T.S. Eliot and several writers of the nineteen-thirties. Given the influence, novelty and (in the early years of the decade at least) notoriety of Eliot's poetry throughout this period, it is natural to expect his influence to be, in some ways, very direct and observable.

I have chosen to single out five poets and one novelist of the period for special and detailed attention. This is due to my belief that Eliot's creative influence on the nineteen-thirties can be best demonstrated in all its complexity by reference to a number of specific writers. In other words, I believe that the connections between Eliot and these six writers typifies the nature of Eliot's influence on the decade as a whole. This influence moves from virtual plagiarism in Ronald Bottrall's case to a smart but derivative stylishness in the works of Auden and Spender—and finally through to a more intelligent and indirect debt in the case of William Empson and Evelyn Waugh. Dylan Thomas I include for consideration as an example of how Eliot's influence during this period exerted itself even on the sensibility of an artist fundamentally different from himself.

The latter half of the book is devoted to a consideration of the likenesses and similarities which can be observed between Evelyn Waugh's first three novels and Eliot's earlier poetry. Waugh and Eliot were remarkably akin in terms of their moral, cultural and philosophical ideas—and this foundation often under-pins, and perhaps helps to explicate, the more direct and obvious resemblances in their work. I believe that this examination of Waugh's novels, up to and including *Black Mischief* demonstrates clearly just how real Waugh's early debt to Eliot was.

## INTRODUCTION

*The Concise Encyclopaedia of English and American Poets and Poetry*, first published in 1963, has the following to say concerning T.S. Eliot and his place in the twentieth-century English literary tradition:

In the growth and consolidation of his influence since the time of *The Waste Land* and *The Sacred Wood*, Eliot's critical and creative work have lent one another authority. His principal essays have placed in circulation a view of poetry not so much counter-romantic as counter-Georgian, emphasizing the critical intelligence as a creative faculty the primacy of the poem over the poet, and the impersonal authority of tradition, which the achieved work seeks to manifest (His verse, correspondingly, brings to the turned phrase and the weighty lines of the Jacobean a wit which, like Marvell's and LaFontaine's, testifies to a poised and active intelligence cool amid the ambient magniloquence).<sup>1</sup>

This is a pointed and succinct account of Eliot's creative practice and the profound influence of this practice written in the English language during the twentieth-century. It is possibly true to say that even at the beginning of the twenty-first century, we have still not seen the fullest and most profound effects of this influence. Certainly it is obvious that Yeats, for all his beauty and haunting power, stands at the end of a poetic tradition, while Eliot inaugurates a new one: or more precisely, develops the old traditions along new and original lines. Perhaps in 2011 it is looking more and more likely that Eliot could be the last universally acknowledged "great" poet to have written in the English language. This is not so much because of the daunting task he set for other poets who followed in his footsteps, as because of the contemporary realization that Eliot's "dislocation" of language into poetic meaning might have been one last Herculean effort before the practice of writing poetry itself fell into disuse. Once poetry was the prime medium for expressing high and innovative ideas in society. However, over the centuries this role has declined to the point where today society as a whole takes little

interest in those few artists who still ply the solitary poet's trade. Of course, there have been some reasonable minor poets like Philip Larkin and Thom Gunn since Eliot's time; but is another poet of the magnitude of an Eliot ever likely to appear in the English language again? Perhaps not. Film and digital media have made the slow, two-dimensional building up of a poem's meaning and structure as obsolete as silent movies.

In the latter part of the twentieth and first part of the twenty-first centuries, there has been a reaction against Eliot's profundities—as was perhaps inevitable. It is possible that we have as yet been unable to fully assimilate the fundamental changes in sensibility and technique effected by Eliot's writings. Perhaps the possibility is slowly beginning to dawn on interested poets and critics that Eliot's was (metaphorically speaking) the last hand of a solitary player who achieved all he did through the imposition of a final end-game on all other would-be poets. Contemporary poets in bafflement and uncertainty grope towards a new unified consciousness, always uneasily aware of Eliot's uncompromising presence, but uncertain as to the nature of his legacy and how it may best be utilized for the future (if at all!) Those contemporary writers who actively decry Eliot's influence only show their lack of appreciation of the total shift in sensibility effected by Eliot. The clear license which modern poets possess to deal with all aspects of human life and experience is clearly due to Eliot's earlier pioneering work. However, whether this influence can be effectively utilized or simply heralds the end of poetry as we know it is a moot point.

To the present date, the most obvious and all-pervasive influence of Eliot's work on contemporary poetry written in English has been his broadening out of our idea of the "poetic". Since Eliot, poetry is expected to deal with what is considered conventionally suitable material

for poetic expression, but with all experiences which play upon the creative sensibility (however “unpoetic” they may seem in themselves). It is true that great poets have always needed to speak about the most diverse aspects of human experience. However, this is an insight that can easily be lost sight of and it was Eliot’s achievement to rediscover this fundamental poetic truth for the twentieth-century.

It is my intention in the discussion which follows to draw out the similarities and connections which exist between Eliot and several writers of the nineteen-thirties. By the close of that decade, the poetry by which Eliot will be remembered (with the exception of the complete *Four Quartets*) was written and published. Given the over-arching influence of Eliot through this decade it is reasonable to assume that his particular mode of poetic and critical expression will be observable (in various and diverse ways) in other creative writers of the period: and indeed, this is undoubtedly the case.

I have chosen to single out five poets and one novelist of the period for special and detailed attention. This is due to my belief that Eliot’s creative influence on the nineteen-thirties can best be demonstrated in all its complexity by reference to a number of specific writers. In other words, I feel that the connections and likenesses between Eliot and these six writers typifies the nature of Eliot’s influence on the decade as a whole. This influence moves from something very close to plagiarism in the case of Ronald Bottrall to what I would term a musical and prolix derivativeness in the work of Auden and Spender—and finally through to a wiser and more subtle debt in the cases of William Empson and Evelyn Waugh. I include Dylan Thomas as an example of a poet of the nineteen-thirties who was fundamentally different to Eliot, yet was still unable to fully escape his colossal influence on the decade.



One half of the ensuing discussion is devoted to a consideration of the likenesses and similarities which can be observed between Evelyn Waugh's first three novels and Eliot's earlier poetry. I feel that this examination of Waugh's novels up to and including *Black Mischief* demonstrates clearly just how real Waugh's early debt to Eliot was. Waugh and Eliot were remarkably akin in terms of their moral, cultural and philosophical ideas; and this foundation often underpins—and perhaps helps to explicate—the more direct and obvious resemblances in their work.

Of course, in his novels up to *Black Mischief* Waugh is essentially the satirist and his humor is, in this respect, very different to the more dispassionate, ironic, mocking humor of the early Eliot (which was very largely derived from the nineteenth-century French symbolist poet, Jules Laforgue). However, while the artistic form and emphasis is often different, there yet remains a real and specific debt in terms of detail, image and idea.

In Waugh's fourth novel, *A Handful of Dust*, Eliot's influence is both fully acknowledged and largely laid to rest. The title is taken from the first section of *The Waste Land* and is intended to imply the main thesis of the novel: that civilization itself is breaking down due to the decay of accepted moral, social and cultural standards. Of course, this is a central concern of Eliot's in *The Waste Land*. However, the artistic method is very different.

The English literary decade of the nineteen-thirties is often regarded as being pre-eminently "Marxist" in outlook, with writers such as Auden, Spender and C. Day Lewis to the forefront of the new movement. These poets strove for a popular appeal which they felt was lacking in Eliot's poetry. Paradoxically, this poetry of "social concern" could hardly have been written without the earlier pioneering work of Eliot, through which ideas concerning what was

“poetic” and what was “unpoetic” had been modified allowing poetry to become the medium for the discussion of serious contemporary problems.

In any case, in retrospect it can be seen that (with the possible exception of W.H. Auden) the left-wing poets of the nineteen-thirties were very minor figures. Eliot’s influence was to prove more constructive and enduring in the work of the less obviously didactic artists of the decade (there is very little that is obviously “didactic” in Evelyn Waugh’s first three novels).

To give a specific example of this, the form of an ironic and deflating mode of expression typical of early Eliot, often apparent in Auden and also present in some of the best of William Empson’s poetry, resurfaced in the nineteen-seventies in the self-deprecatory verse of Philip Larkin:

Sexual intercourse began  
In nineteen sixty-three  
(which was rather late for me)  
Between the end of the Chatterley ban  
And the Beatles’ first L.P.  
Annus Mirabilis: 1974

Certainly the surface form and emphasis of the irony changed somewhat in the latter half of the twentieth century. Nevertheless, the kind of painful, though humorous honesty apparent in much of Larkin’s verse would surely have been impossible without the earlier publication of “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock”. Even in the twenty-first century, Eliot’s profound creative influence has not dissipated itself, but continues to broaden out into ever

more oblique and multifarious forms: sometimes there is an echo of one of his cadences in contemporary song lyrics or the tortuous and self-righteous rhythms of rap.

Perhaps the overarching influence of Eliot's creative practices on artists and writers of every ilk over the last hundred years or so, could not be more accurately interpreted than through Eliot's own words on his great contemporary, W.B. Yeats. Yeats is, Eliot concludes, one of those few poets "whose history is the history of their own time, who are a part of the consciousness of an age which cannot be understood without them". Certainly, this is true of Eliot himself.

## **PART ONE: THE NIGHTINGALES**

## CHAPTER ONE: W.H. AUDEN

The first essential necessity in discussing Auden's debt to Eliot is to distinguish the very great discrepancy between the two poets in terms of quality. It is often accepted in many quarters that Auden is, after Eliot, the pre-eminent English poet of the modern age. Besides being perhaps misleading in itself, this belief tends to gloss over the fundamental truth that Eliot as a poet stands head and shoulders over all his English contemporaries and successors. Auden's was a talent that belonged to the minor rank. In these circumstances, likenesses and similarities to Eliot in Auden's work are not likely to tell in Auden's favor. Genius can take over the material and forms of other men and transmute them into something interesting and original. However, talent when using the ideas and forms of greater artists, is likely to prove merely derivative.

This very wide discrepancy in terms of sheer quality between Eliot and Auden would now be pretty generally accepted. However, in 1948 a reviewer in "The Times Literary Supplement" could write the following:

In 1930 in the shadow of, but not too close to, Mr. J. Alfred Prufrock the *Poems* of Mr. W.H. Auden first appeared. Mr. T.S. Eliot's *Waste Land* had prepared the way by showing out the Georgians as gracefully but as finally as his Bloomsbury lady pours out tea.<sup>1</sup>

F.R. Leavis in *The Common Pursuit* writes of this passage:

The critic himself doesn't actually say, as the acclaimers of that Poetic Renaissance in which Mr. Auden played the leading part did, that Auden superseded Eliot, but his commentary may fairly be said to be in resonance with that view. That is, if we are to grant that what he offers is serious criticism, then the fashionable relegation of Mr. Eliot that marked the advancing nineteen-thirties was critically respectable: it was the supersession as the reigning power in poetry of one creative genius by another who understood better how to satisfy the needs of the time.<sup>2</sup>

Some of the supposed reasons for Auden's superiority is brought out by the same TLS reviewer at a different point in the same article:

Auden's (poetry)...was philosophy undigested but illuminated by a poet's intuition. It was poetry taken from the same events as those recorded in the daily newspapers. Its range was as sensational, its attitudes as unpedantic; its acuteness in reading the signs of the weather a hundred times greater...For good measure he threw into his verse, like toys, the names of Freud and Rilke; he made the Mother symbol smart; he made poetry out of dance lyrics.<sup>3</sup>

Leavis is surely correct in pointing out that it is just for the very reasons emphasized by the TLS reviewer that Auden is quite palpably *not* a great poet. He possessed a superficial interest in many different facets of art and life, but lacked any deep understanding. Auden often simply "name-drops" in his work and, in the process, creates a poetic hodgepodge. Auden was a man whose mind—to use Leavis' words—"remained permanently at the undergraduate level."<sup>4</sup>

According to Neville Coghill, Auden's tutor at Oxford, the poet first came across Eliot's work in 1926, and indeed the influence of the older poet is most pronounced in Auden's earlier works.<sup>5</sup> Christopher Isherwood, in an essay on Auden's early poetry, is informative concerning this influence.

While Auden was up at Oxford he read T.S. Eliot. The discovery of *The Waste Land* marked a turning point in his work—for the better certainly; though the earliest symptoms of Eliot's influence were most alarming. Like a patient who has received an over powerful inoculation. Auden developed a serious attack of allusions, jargonitis and private jokes. He began to write lines like "inexorable Rembrandt rays that stab..." or "Love mutual has reached its first entectic..." Nearly all the poems of that early Eliot period are now scrapped.<sup>6</sup>

Very well. But in 1940 Auden could still write a stanza like:

Anthropos Apteros perplexed

To know which turning to take next

Looked up and wished he were a bird

To whom such doubts must seem absurd.

The Maze: 1940

Even as late as 1963, Auden was still producing lines like:

Among pelagian travellers

Lost on their lewd conceited ways

To Massachusetts, Michigan

Miami or L.A.

An airborne instrument I sit,

Predestined nightly to fulfill

Columbia-Giesen-Managements'

Unfathomable will.

On the Circuit: 1963

The connections between stanzas such as those quoted above and the Eliot of *Ara Vos Prec* are really too obvious to labor. However, whereas Eliot's development of Laforguan irony in a musical if prolix way produces a genuinely delightful and ironic effect, Auden's attempts "in the manner of" limp along mustily academic and devoid of all vitality.

In *Oxford Poetry 1926-28* where the early works of writers such as Auden, Spender and Day Lewis appeared, we have further allusions to Eliot. In the epigraph to a poem called "Thomas Epilogises" Auden speaks of a "sunken acreage of basement kitchens"—presumably hoping to go one better than Eliot in his poem "Morning at the Window":

They are rattling breakfast plates in  
Basement kitchens...

Similarly, in the sonnet sequence entitled “In Time of War”, originally published in the mid nineteen-thirties, we find in a poem entitled “Chinese soldier” the lines:

Professors of Europe, hostess, citizen  
Respect the boy. Unknown to your reporters  
He turned to dust in China that your daughters...

Auden, when publishing this sonnet for book publication, in *Journey to a War* (1939) changed these lines to:

He neither knew nor chose the Good, but taught us  
And added meaning like a comma when  
He turned to dust in China.

Perhaps this alteration provides us with an example of the early Auden attempting to move away from the rhythmic influence of Eliot in *The Waste Land*:

O the moon shone bright on Mrs. Porter  
And on her daughter  
They wash their feet in soda water.

The rhythm and rhyme of the Eliot lines are perfectly suited to his vivid burlesque, but completely unsuited to the essentially serious point Auden was trying to make in his poem.

*The Orators*, written when Auden was twenty-five, was the work which set the seal on the poet’s early reputation. The second part of Book One introduces the theme of the establishment of a new order by a mysterious leader. The speaker is affected by the idea of



the cycle of seasonal change, of death and life. The image of the skull forced out of the dyke by the growing bulbs conjures up memories of a 1920 Eliot poem:

In Spring we saw  
The bulb pillow  
Raising the skull  
Thrusting a crocus through clenched teeth.

And, by comparison:

Webster was much possessed by death  
And saw the skull beneath the skin,  
And breastless creatures underground  
Leaned backward with a lipless grin.  
Whispers of Immortality. (1920)

As we have seen, it is mostly in Auden's early work of the nineteen-thirties that Eliot's influence is strongest. However, Auden did, on occasions, continue to echo Eliot for the rest of his poetic life.

*For The Time Being* (written between 1941-42) is a Christmas Oratorio, and it suffers from the pretentious and somewhat glib tone into which Auden so easily fell when operating within these artificial forms. The poem, if not enormous in length, is certainly ambitious in scope. The oratorio is divided into a number of sections: "The Annunciation", "The Temptation of St. Joseph", "The Summons", "At the Manger", "The Meditation of Simeon" and "The Massacre of the Innocents". The oratorio concludes with "Flight into Egypt", in which the desert becomes a symbol of modern decadence. All the characters and situations lack imaginative

substance. This is felt most strongly when one puts them alongside Eliot's "Journey of the Magi" and "Song for Simeon" from which Auden almost certainly took suggestions. Auden's treatment is more pretentious and less simple: his scenes less well-realized in terms of concrete detail. Everything in Auden's fable is a vehicle for the strange paradoxes of theological metaphysics:

Space is the Whom our loves are needed by

Time is the choice of How to love and why.

Auden's desert and garden are pale echoes of Eliot's famous symbolic creations. Eliot's moveless center (from Aristotle and Dante) is boldly invoked and given a smart new turn.

O where is that immortal and nameless centre from which our point of

Definition and death are equi-distant?

Perhaps one of the most succinct statements of the smart superficiality of much of Auden's poetry comes from Eliot himself. After a meeting with Auden in New York in June 1946, Eliot wrote to Ursula Niebuhr about Auden's poetry: "I think his spiritual development has outstripped his technical development, while his technique is such that it is almost able to deceive us? (and himself) into thinking it is adequate."<sup>7</sup>

To conclude, then, Auden was profoundly affected by the influence of Eliot, particularly in his early work, but also in the middle and later poetry. However, Auden cannot be said to use Eliot sensibly or well. Eliot's influence, when it is present, is not transformed into something new and original, but is rather imitated. This is to say that when Auden's writing was influenced by Eliot, Auden produced the kind of poetry that Eliot would have written had he been a much inferior poet to the poet he was.

## CHAPTER TWO: STEPHEN SPENDER

In his autobiography, *World Within World*, Spender has the following to say about the early influence of “the modern movement” on his mind:

What excited me about the modern movement was the inclusion within new forms, of material which seemed ugly, anti-poetic and inhuman. The transformation of the sordid scene and life of the Dublin of Stephen Daedalus and Bloom into the poetic novel whose title, *Ulysses*, sets its aim beside that of the most timeless epic; the juxtaposition of scenes of European decline with ones recalling the greatest glories of the past tradition in Eliot’s *The Waste Land*: these showed me that modern life could be material for art, and that the poet, instead of having to set himself apart from his time, could create out of an acceptance of it.<sup>1</sup>

These words certainly emphasize the contribution Eliot made to changing the poetic sensibility of his time by making the apparently “unpoetic” seem “poetic”. However, what also comes across in Spender’s words is a kind of immature schoolboy enthusiasm, always ready to take up any new fad which is contemporary and in vogue. Indeed, it is just this sense of schoolboy enthusiasm that typified the left-orientated literary movement of the nineteen-thirties. A committed political writer like Edgell Rickword wrote intuitively *with* the “common man” while Auden and his followers wrote didactically *for* him, condescending to preach and instruct.

Spender’s modernism often amounted to no more than incongruous references to factories, pylons, skyscrapers and dams. Sometimes he will use a “modern” image that is so bad as to be laughable.

The greed for property

Heaps a skyscraper over the breathing ribs.

In this section of a poem entitled “Shapes of death haunt life”, the image of a skyscraper is ludicrously out of proportion to the “breathing ribs”. Moreover ribs don’t breathe, being

solid bone--and it is difficult to think of any real or imaginative link between a skyscraper and ribs.

Throughout Spender's work of the nineteen-thirties it appears that he has only appreciated the pioneering work of artists like Eliot and Joyce in a superficial way. Great poets have always found it necessary to range diversely over the contemporary world in which they live, describing both its beautiful and sordid aspects. In this context, it might be said that references to contemporary events and happenings are simply the concomitant of universality. However, it is natural enough that mediocre writers will prove capable only of perceiving certain surface effects and produce poetic squibs rather than complex art.

In Spender's poetry of the nineteen-thirties there are countless examples of this kind of smart but shallow modernism. For example, the following is taken from a poem entitled "Acts passed beyond the boundary of mere wishing":

When we touched hands  
I felt the whole rebel, feared meeting  
And turned away  
Thinking, if these were tricklings through a dam,  
I must have love enough to run a factory on,  
Or give a city power, or drive a train.

Here, a conventional poetic theme is juxtaposed with "modern" city imagery in a totally artificial and inappropriate way. Is love, that most rarified and sacrosanct of all human emotions, an appropriate source of energy to run a factory on? Again, in terms of proportion

the image is absurd. One man is hardly likely to have enough of anything to “give a city power, or drive a train.”

Spender’s autobiography reinforces the idea gained from his poetry of a poetic mediocrity with a superficial mind. One of the most revealing points to emerge from Spender’s account of his time at Oxford with Auden is the author’s inability to see through the pretentious gesturing of Auden himself.

At Oxford I started writing poems containing references to gasworks, factories and slums. I understood the significance beneath the affectation of Auden’s saying that the most beautiful walk in Oxford was that along the canal, past the gasworks, and that the poet must go dressed like “Mr. Everyman.”<sup>2</sup>

What significance? Surely this is no more than a sign of Auden’s immersion in Eliot’s

*Waste Land*:

A rat crept softly through the vegetation  
Dragging its slimy belly on the bank  
While I was fishing in the dull canal  
On a winter evening round behind the gashouse  
Musing upon the king my brother’s wreck  
And on the king my father’s death before him.

This kind of gullible acceptance of Auden’s pretentiousness, is everywhere apparent in Spender’s autobiography. For example, he writes the following account of Auden at Oxford:

He used a vocabulary containing words drawn from scientific, psychological and philological terminology. At the same time he avoided the jargon in which articles by political journalists, economists, psychologists and scientists are usually written. He used these technical words with a certain effect of mysteriousness which communicated itself excitingly, as Milton uses names of heathen gods, with an intellectual awareness of what they signify and yet like a kind of abracadabra.<sup>3</sup>

Abracadabra is the right word. It correctly conveys the cheap effects conjured up by Auden's polysyllabic but superficial learning. Certainly, Spender was not a difficult audience to convince. Early in his autobiography he makes the following amazing statement:

Most of all, Auden had an ascendancy over his friends which was due to his being versed in psychoanalysis and therefore in a position to diagnose their complexes.<sup>4</sup>

Of Spender's autobiography, C.H. Sisson has made the following perceptive comment:

A certain painful and priggish sincerity disengages itself from the pages of Spender's autobiography—It is the tone of a man who attaches an infinite importance to his own emotions, and to himself as a "personality".<sup>5</sup>

T.S. Eliot's direct influence on Spender was marked in his work of the nineteen-thirties by the kind of smart modernism already examined. Sometimes, however, there is a direct reminiscence of tone, as in the following poem, entitled "Moving through the silent crowd" which suggests the Eliot quatrain poems of 1920 with its attempt at a tight irony:

Now they've no work, like better men  
Who sit at desks and take much pay  
They sleep long nights and rise at ten  
To watch the hours that drain away.

In a poem called "Variations On My Life" there is evidence that Spender had learned something from Eliot's use of lines of irregular length, rhyming dramatically rather than regularly:

To knock and enter  
Knock and enter  
The cloudless posthumous door

Where my guts are strung upon a harp that sings of praise

And then to sit and speak

With those who knocked and entered before.

Another interesting point is that the first two lines of this poem, in their use of repetition, recall the technique employed by Eliot in “Ash Wednesday”:

Because I do not hope to turn again

Because I do not hope

Because I do not hope to turn.

This debt to Eliot’s “Ash Wednesday” is even more apparent in a poem entitled “The Uncreating Chaos” which, like the Eliot poem, is divided into sections employing differing rhythms and tones. The second section begins:

I am so close to you

I will confess to you

I do all you do.

Once again the technique of repetition, employed by Eliot in “Ash Wednesday”, is utilized. However, the effect in the Spender poem is to create an almost comic rhythm which is totally out of tune with the serious content he wishes to convey.

Occasionally, however, Spender was capable of writing lines which were sincere and free of posture—as in the following poem from the nineteen-thirties, which takes its first line as a title:

My parents kept me from children who were rough

Who threw words like stones and who wore torn clothes

Their thighs showed through rags. They ran in the street  
And climbed the cliffs and stripped by the country streams.

I feared more than tigers their muscles like iron  
Their jerking hands and their knees tight on my arms.  
I feared the salt coarse pointing of those boys  
Who copied my lisp behind me on the road.

Perhaps the best way to end this section is by quoting C.H. Sisson's percipient  
assessment of Spender from his book *English Poetry 1900-1950*:

Spender's poetic oeuvre is slight but genuine. At his best he succeeds in being the disarming and disarmed character he pretends to be. He cannot be said to have made any contribution to the technique of verse though he has, at times, a personal limpness. He has, however, at times also a clarity which might have been the vehicle for imparting more interesting truths, if the mind behind this style had been more interesting.<sup>6</sup>



## CHAPTER THREE: WILLIAM EMPSON

### I

There is little direct connection between the style and construction of William Empson's "clotted" poetry and the rich—sometimes even opulent—poetry of T.S. Eliot. However, the relationship between these two writers is distinct. F.R. Leavis in his *New Bearings in English Poetry* brought out the nature of this connection very well:

The significant kind of relations to...(Eliot)...is illustrated by the half-a-dozen remarkable poems that Mr. William Empson contributed to *Cambridge Poetry* 1929. Mr. Empson's poetry is quite unlike Mr. Eliot's, but without the creative stir and the re-orientation produced by Mr. Eliot it would not have been written.<sup>1</sup>

As Leavis points out, Empson's debt to Eliot was not primarily structural (though there was *some* influence here), but intellectual. In particular, Empson was indebted to Eliot for his establishment of "the seventeenth century in its due place in the English tradition."<sup>2</sup>

One of Empson's poems, "Arachne" opens:

"Twixt devil and deep sea, man hacks his caves;  
Birth, death; one, many; what is true and seems;  
Earth's vast hot iron, cold space's empty waves.  
King spider, walks the velvet roof of streams;  
Must bird and fish, must god and beast avoid  
Dance, like nine angels, on pin-point extremes.

Leavis quite rightly pointed out Empson's great debt to Donne in this poem, and further asserted that Empson's debt to Donne is at the same time a debt to Eliot and his work in reasserting the importance of the seventeenth-century tradition to the modern poet.

At this point, it is necessary to take a close look at Eliot's much quoted essay on the Metaphysical poets:

The poets of the seventeenth-century, the successors of the dramatists of the sixteenth, possessed a mechanism of sensibility which could devour any kind of experience. They are simple, artificial, difficult, or fantastic, as their predecessors were; no less nor more than Dante, Guido Cavalcante, Guinicelli, or Cinna. In the seventeenth-century a dissociation of sensibility set in from which we have never recovered.

A little later, in the same essay, Eliot states his belief in the peculiar similarities and connections which exist between the seventeenth-century metaphysical poets and poets writing in the modern age:

We can...say that it appears likely that poets in our civilization, as it exists at present, must be difficult. Our civilization comprehends great variety and complexity, and this variety and complexity, playing upon a refined sensibility, must produce various and complex results. The poet must become more and more comprehensive, , more allusive, more indirect, in order to force, to dislocate if necessary, language into his meaning...Hence we get something which looks very much like the conceit—we get, in fact, a method curiously similar to that of obscure words and of simple phrasing.<sup>3</sup>

If we consider Eliot's 1920 volume, *Ara Vos Prec*, in the light of these comments, we will go a long way towards finding a satisfactory explanation for the arcane and eclectic nature of the poems.

Empson's poems usually lack the musical flow of Eliot's 1920 volume, but always there is the same intention to yoke "the most heterogenous ideas...by violence together."<sup>4</sup> Just occasionally, Empson even achieves something of Eliot's sing-song quality:

Lucretius could not credit centaurs:

Such bicycle he deemed asynchronous.

“Man superannuates the horse;  
Horse pulses will not gear with ours.”

Johnson could see no bicycle would go;  
“You bear yourself, and the machine as well.”  
Gennets for germans sprang not from Othello.  
And Ixion rides upon a single wheel.

Courage. Weren't strips of heart culture seen  
Of late mating two periodicities?  
Could not Professor Charles Darwin  
Graft annual upon perennial trees?  
Invitation to Juno

Usually the connections with Eliot in Empson's poetry are more oblique than in “Invitation to Juno”. Leavis, in *New Bearings*, accurately asserts that Empson's debt to Eliot is, on the whole, an intellectual one. It was Eliot, through his poetry and criticism, that re-established the seventeenth-century in its place in the poetic tradition and it was this that made the writing of Empson's poetry—so profoundly influenced by metaphysical concepts—possible:

In the seventeenth-century (at any rate in the tradition deriving from Donne) it was assumed that a poet should be a man of distinguished intelligence, and he was encouraged by the conventions to bring into his poetry the varied interests of his life. Mr. Empson's importance is that he is a very intelligent man with an interest, not only in emotions and words, but also in ideas and the sciences, and

that he has acquired enough mastery of technique to write poetry in which all this is apparent.<sup>5</sup>

Empson's "Camping Out" requires of the reader the same kind of ingenious drawing out of suggestions and implications that is so typical of Donne's poetry:

And now she cleans her teeth into the lake:  
Give it (God's grace) for her own bounty's sake  
What morning's pale and crisp mist debars:  
Its glass of the divine (that Will could break)  
Restores, beyond nature: or lets heaven take  
(Itself being dimmed) her pattern, who half-awake  
Milks between rocks a straddled sky of stars.

Soap tension the star pattern magnifies.  
Smoothly Madonna through-assumes the skies  
Whose vaults are opened to achieve the Lord  
No, it is we soaring explore galaxies,  
Our bullet boat light's speed by thousand flies.  
Who moves so among stars their frame unties:  
See where they blur, and die, and are outsoared.

Empson's poetry shows how far, as a result of the success of Eliot's poetry, wit and intellectuality had come to be thought of as natural in modern poetry. In the introduction to the notes in his *Collected Poems*, Empson writes:

It is impertinent to expect hard work from the reader merely because you have failed to show what you were comparing to what, and though to write notes on such a point is a confession of failure it seems an inoffensive one... Also there is no longer a reasonably small field which may be taken as general knowledge.<sup>6</sup>

Empson's notes are very interesting and serve a rather different function from Eliot's.

Often Empson's notes appear to supply some helpful detail or hint which failed to get into the poem. In this respect, Empson's notes are integral to the meaning of the poem in a way which the notes to *The Waste Land* are not. For Empson they are the literary complement to the poem, and the language of poetry is often continuous with the explanatory language of prose.

Empson's own finest poems make plain the weakness of the rest of his work. In a poem like "Arachne" his ingenuity is completely under the direction and control of the central feeling of the poem. Rarely does Empson succeed so well (though "Legal Fiction", "To an Old Lady" and "This Last Pain" would provide three further examples). Usually Empson's wit lacks the power to reverberate throughout a poem and to clinch its argument emotionally (as in Donne). This is very largely because Empson is too interested in the arguments of his poems, and unlike Donne he tends not to use false argument as an important poetic device. In Empson's poetry there is usually a clear line of argument,, which carries the main interest of the poem: the wit too often consists in sharp or obscure ways of saying what is said.

I think at this stage of the discussion—and in the light of everything that has been said—it would prove useful and enlightening to take a close look at one of Empson's better poems, in order to view the poet's allusive technique at work.

## II

The idea of the poem is that human nature can conceive divine states which it cannot attain; Wittgenstein is only relevant because such feelings have produced philosophies different from his.<sup>7</sup>

This is how William Empson himself interprets the central theme of “This Last Pain”, and indeed the whole poem would seem to be, at least to some extent, a dialogue with the figure of Ludwig Wittgenstein and the ideas propounded in his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. However, Wittgenstein’s concepts are on occasions used very loosely—or perhaps with a deliberate intention to subtly misinterpret (and this hypothesis is reinforced by the latter part of the above “note” which accompanies the poem).

In “This Last Pain” Empson appears to take the position that utterances about such matters as “God”, “The soul” and “heaven” are conceivable in imaginative terms—but are, nevertheless, completely untrue:

This last pain for the damned the father’s found  
They knew that bliss with which they were not crowned  
Such but on earth let me foretell  
Is all of heaven and all of hell.

In the first two lines of this stanza Empson makes a point of stating man’s ability to imagine divine states, while in the last two lines he insists that such imaginative activity is a merely spatio-temporal phenomenon. Man’s ability to imagine or conceive divine states is a self-deluding activity. There can be nothing beyond the temporal world of material existence.

The second stanza of the poem reinforces this point:

Man as the prying housemaid of the soul,  
May know her happiness by key to hole:  
He's safe; the key is lost; he knows  
Door will not open, nor hole close.

Implicitly, the view of reality propounded by Empson in the first two stanzas of the poem appears—at least in part—as an attempt to refute some of the major ideas of Ludwig Wittgenstein who had insisted in his *Tractatus* on the impossibility of talking about, or logically conceiving, divine states.

Wittgenstein himself was a good deal of a mystic and did not necessarily believe that nothing lay beyond logical, linguistic expression. Indeed, there is a very real, if vague, religious faith expressed in the latter part of the *Tractatus*—as a couple of examples will serve to show:

1.432 How things are in the world is a matter of complete indifference for what is higher. God does not reveal himself *in* the world.<sup>8</sup>

And:

6.52 We feel that even when all possible scientific questions have been answered, the problems of life remain completely untouched. Of course, there are then no questions left, and this itself is the answer.<sup>9</sup>

Wittgenstein's essential concern in *Tractatus* is expressed in his short preface:

The book deals with the problems of philosophy, and shows, I believe, that the reason why these problems are posed is that the logic of our language is misunderstood. The whole sense of the book might be summed up in the following words: what can be said at all can be said clearly, and what we cannot talk about we must pass over in silence.<sup>10</sup>

It was Wittgenstein's concern, then, to discover the exact location of the line dividing sense from nonsense, so that people might realize when they had reached it and stop; what lay beyond the line was unutterable and, consequently, incapable of being formulated in terms of a

logical proposition. However, what lay beyond logical formulation was real enough for

Wittgenstein:

6.54 My propositions serve as elucidations in the following way: anyone who understands me eventually recognizes them as nonsensical when he has used them—as steps—to climb up beyond them (He must, so to speak, throw away the ladder after he has climbed up it)....He must transcend these propositions and then he will see the world aright.<sup>11</sup>

For Empson, however, it is impossible to “transcend these propositions” as it is his belief that there is no state of existence beyond the material world. It is his conviction that it is man’s self-deceptive faculty of imagination—which is perfectly capable of being expressed linguistically—that leads to the popular illusion of a state of existence beyond space and time.

In the third stanza of “This Last Pain” Empson refers to Wittgenstein directly:

What is conceivable can happen too

Said Wittgenstein, who had not dreamt of you.

In spite of Empson’s remarks in his “note” to the poem and the earlier implicit criticism of Wittgenstein’s philosophy, the poet here—perhaps, willfully—subtly suggests that Wittgenstein’s thoughts can be used to justify his own point of view. The lines were undoubtedly suggested by a statement from *Tractatus*:

3.02 A thought contains the possibility of the situation of which it is the thought. Wwhat is thinkable is possible too.<sup>12</sup>

Here, Wittgenstein is asserting that all “states of affairs” that might develop from a logical thought are capable of being described linguistically. However, Empson seems to imply in his poem that as Wittgenstein would certainly place matters of religious “truth” outside the scope of logical propositional statements, he would necessarily conclude that mystical and



religious insights are worthless and intrinsically nonsensical. However, as we have seen, this would be to misinterpret Wittgenstein.

Perhaps Wittgenstein's most essential point in *Tractatus* is that mystical and religious "truths" lie outside the jurisdiction of philosophy and language as they are inherently unprovable. Mystical and religious insight may or may not express "truth", but they are certainly incapable of being analyzed linguistically. A religious tenet is not a factual hypothesis, but something which affects our thoughts and actions in a different way: the meaning of a religious insight is not a function of what would have to be the case if it were true, but a function of the difference that it makes to the lives of those who maintain it. Religious beliefs, unlike scientific beliefs, are not hypotheses, are not based on evidence and cannot be regarded as more or less probable.

In "This Last Pain" Empson makes the error of presuming that what may be termed "nonsense" in Wittgensteinian linguistic terms must also necessarily be untrue. In fact, Wittgenstein uses the word "nonsense" not in the sense of "obviously untrue", but rather to mean incapable of verification. Certainly, Wittgenstein would have little sympathy with the ideas expressed in lines such as:

All those large dreams by which men long live well  
Are magic-lanterned on the smoke of hell:  
This then is real I have implied,  
A painted small transparent slide.

This is to be dogmatic and assertive in linguistic terms about that which is inherently unknowable. For Wittgenstein, it was necessary to pass over matters of religion and metaphysics in silence.

In the final stanza of the poem, Empson seems to ask the reader to forget his pain at the cruelty of the difference between appearance and reality and lose himself in impossible visions, which may at least make his life bearable: again, a very un-Wittgensteinian idea.

Imagine then by miracle with me,  
(Ambiguous gifts as what gods give must be)  
What could not possibly be there,  
And learn a style from a despair.

To conclude then, Empson in his poem “This Last Pain” makes very obvious use of current Wittgensteinian thoughts and concepts in order to fulfill his own poetic purposes. In this respect, Empson appears very much as the difficult, modern Eliotic poet with “his intellect at the tip of his senses”; and indeed there can be little doubt that Eliot’s essay “The Metaphysical Poets” did provide an intellectual and artistic context for Empson’s poetry.

## CHAPTER FOUR: RONALD BOTTRALL

Ronald Bottrall was hailed by F.R. Leavis in his *New Bearings in English Poetry* as a “young poet whose achieved work leaves no room for doubt about his future.”<sup>1</sup>

In retrospect it can be clearly seen that Leavis was far too sanguine concerning the future prospects of his poetic protégé who has spoken very specifically of his debt to Ezra Pound’s “Hugh Selwyn Mauberley” and “Dr. Leavis, who when I was in Finland suggested to me that I should read and study that poem.”<sup>2</sup>

However, when Bottrall was a young man at Cambridge it is almost certain that Eliot would have been the most crucial influence. James Reeves has emphasized the importance of this influence for Cambridge poets of the nineteen-thirties.

The stranger who enters an Anglican Church at service time is handed two books, “Hymns Ancient and Modern” and “The Book of Common Prayer.” When I went up to Cambridge twenty years ago, I was handed as it were, in much the same spirit, two little books, the one in prose, the other in verse. They were *The Sacred Wood* and *Poems 1909-25*. Those who played the part of my sidesmen were not, it should be said my tutors but my fellow undergraduates, Eliot was not at the time officially recognized.”<sup>3</sup>

It would probably be accurate to say that Eliot was appreciated in Oxbridge circles before he was really understood. *The Waste Land* had provided the most profound influence, opening up a new conception of poetry. Most importantly, Eliot’s poetry served a symbolic function. Undergraduates of the period were familiar with the painting of Matisse and Picasso, but had not discovered an English poet who was modern in the same kind of way.

This Eliotic influence was quite overwhelming for Ronald Bottrall who has made explicit the deep influence Eliot exerted on his own development as a young poet:

The two writers of poetry who particularly influenced me (and I can say that without hesitation, I can use the word “influence”) were Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot.<sup>4</sup>

In his *New Bearings in English poetry*, Leavis stated his belief that Bottrall “in his spirit of preoccupation with the modern world...less resembles Mr. Pound than Mr. Eliot...His world is Mr. Eliot’s; a world in which the traditions are bankrupt, the cultures uprooted and withering, and the advance of civilization seems to mean death to distinction of spirit and fineness of living.”<sup>5</sup> Leavis goes on to quote from a poem called “The Future is not for us” to support this argument:

The future is not for us, though we can set up  
Our barriers, rest in our dead embered  
Sphere till we come, to pause over our last loving cup  
With death. We are dismembered  
Into a myriad broken shadows.  
Each to himself reflected in a splinter of that glass  
Which we once knew as cosmos, and the close  
Of our long progress is hinted by the crass  
Fogs creeping slow and darkly  
From out the middle west. We can humanize  
We can build new temples for the body  
Set our intellects to tilt against the spies  
Of fortune, call this chance or that fate,  
Estimate the logical worth of “it may depend...”

But we know that we are at the gate

Leading out of the path

Which was to be an Amen having neither beginning or end.

Leavis contends that in this poem Bottrall expresses his sense of the cultural situation that produced *The Waste Land* without offering any reminiscence of *The Waste Land* in rhythm or energy. This is not entirely true. Lines of varying length with irregular rhymes *do* occur in *The Waste Land* as one of several poetic techniques employed by Eliot. The following section from “The Fire Sermon” is representative:

The music crept by me upon the waters

And along the Strand, up Queen Victoria Street.

O City city, I can sometimes hear

Beside a public bar in Lower Thames Street,

The pleasant whining of a mandolin

And a clatter and a chatter from within

Where fishmen lounge at noon: where the walls

Of Magnus Martyr hold

Inexplicable splendor of Ionian white and gold.

However, the important point is that this technique which is employed only sporadically in *The Waste Land* is fundamental to the best of Eliot’s early poetry: in “Prufrock” and “Portrait of a Lady” for example.

Thus Bottrall’s achievement boils down to nothing more than a reformulation of Eliot’s cultural concerns and an aping of the early Eliot’s structural techniques.

In a poem called “Salute To Them That Know” there is a direct reference to Prufrock:

There is yet time, even though the clock  
Is set, there is yet time to brave  
The annals of our age, to put our “wave  
Of progress” in its proper place, recant  
Our late betrayal and plant  
Within the shadow of the rock  
Our bloodless bodies.

The similarity between this and the following passage from “Prufrock” is quite explicit:

And indeed there will be time  
For the yellow smoke that slides along the street  
Rubbing its back upon the window-panes;  
There will be time, there will be time  
To prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet...

It is also worth noting the reference to *The Waste Land* in the Bottrall passage. “Within the shadow of the rock” is obviously derived from one of the most famous passages from “The Burial of the Dead”:

There is shadow under this red rock,  
(Come in under the shadow of this red rock),  
And I will show you something different from either  
Your shadow at morning striding behind you

Or your shadow at evening rising to meet you;  
I will show you fear in a handful of dust.

The other poems from Bottrall's first collection, *The Loosening*, that Leavis chose to praise, today seems simply to highlight Bottrall's shortcomings. Of the following passage, Leavis remarks: "must we despair of attaining a new naturalness at the far end of the experience of disharmony?"<sup>6</sup>

Poised herself like a falcon at check  
Amid the unfooted ploughland,  
Laughter splashing from her mouth and  
Rippling down her brown neck;  
Not passion-rent she  
But sensing in the bound  
Of her breasts vigour to come, free  
With the stream of air-life around.

The answer to Leavis' rhetorical question must be: "yes: if we are to rest our hopes for the future on poets capable of producing such barren and derivative verse as this."

Perhaps Leavis' rather odd enthusiasm can be explained to some extent by the—too intensively—sensual quality of this poem which is suggestive of Lawrence at his worst. Nevertheless, the most obvious structural influence is that of T.S. Eliot, although the poem contains nothing of Eliot's profundity or wit. The lines "But sensing in the bound/Of her breasts vigour to come, free/As air and powered to make her one/With the stream of air-life around.", are laughably ponderous and absurd: and this is to say nothing of the very real technical

weaknesses of the poem, exemplified by such tortuous inversions as “Not passion rent she.”

One can only conclude that in the case of Bottrall’s poetry Leavis’ extraordinarily sensitive critical faculty was disarmed by his concern to discover someone who would continue the new direction given to English poetry by Eliot, Pound and Hopkins.

Bottrall produced two further books of poetry in the nineteen-thirties: *Festivals of Fire* in 1934; and *The Turning Path* in 1939. The title poem of the first signals an advance in pretentiousness, as the prefatory “Note” might lead one to expect:

For the idea of the ground plan of the poem, “Festivals of Fire”, and for certain details of the first three I owe much to Balder the Beautiful, Part VII of Sir J.G. Fraser’s *The Golden Bough*.

The poem might have been provided with a full apparatus of notes, but I believe that the labour-saving value of the annotations would be outweighed by the distractions and misconceptions which they would cause in many readers.<sup>7</sup>

The poem, written in 1932, is in four sections with the titles: “Allegro Moderato E Rubato”; Massig, Doch Immer Noch Etwas Feirlich; Larghetto—Con Fuoco—Rubig Und Bemerkt”; Andante—Allegro Energetico.” It is quite obvious that the plan is copied from *The Waste Land* and the manner suggests a doubtful talent emulating genius.

Came as hostess, extending a drooping  
Hand, the Queen of Sheba, her  
Robe brocade of gold, quartered  
By falbalas of pearls, jaspers and  
Sardonyx. “Come in dearie, come in  
And have a glance over my scarlet  
Garters.” She came sidlin’ up  
Half-canned, makin’ as if



To say to mad Hieronimo

“Fitchew yourself.” What are whores?

Cold Russian winters. Come the Bolibochki

With Romanoff faces...

The connections between this passage and the second and fifth sections of Eliot’s *Waste Land* are really too obvious to labor. The overall effect is to telescope a number of sections from *The Waste Land* into a single condensed and wholly derivative passage.

*The Turning Path* is once more conceived on a grand scale. The poems are said to be arranged in order to form a unit. The book is dedicated to Laura Riding, and also contains a commendatory letter from Robert Graves. There is evidence in this later collection of a greater clarity and conciseness than is exemplified in *Festivals of Fire*. However, Bottrall’s language seldom possesses the certainty one associates with poetry of real quality.

Bottrall’s most interesting poem of the nineteen-thirties is probably “Epitath for a Riveter” from *Festivals of Fire*. This poem is written in a light-hearted vein and shows that he was capable of writing with sensitivity, wit and economy when he was able to forget the need to be culturally significant.

There need be no haste, slowly bear

Him along by the tenements;

He will never give heed to the Metro

Crisply accelerating below the fence.

Womb's entourage gave him small respite  
From the forensic bark of punctual steel;  
Expend no curses on the pathogen  
That stars him in his last newsreel.

Even in this poem, the influence of Eliot's 1920 quatrain poems and Pound's *Mauberley* is obvious. However, for a change, Bottrall is speaking with an individual voice through a derived form: on the whole, an acceptable practice for a poet.

There is in Bottrall's work of the nineteen-thirties an occasional glimpse of genuine poetic ability. However, he was usually able to offer only pretentiousness and sentiment in the guise of poetry, and this (together with the extremely derivative nature of his work) makes it difficult to believe that his verse will ever emerge from the obscurity into which it has sunk.

## CHAPTER FIVE: DYLAN THOMAS

Dylan Thomas was always a great original. Even at his most pretentious it would be difficult to mistake his verse for that of any other twentieth-century poet. However, there is in Thomas' early poetry the odd debt to a number of contemporary poets including Yeats and—more relevant to the present discussion—Eliot.

Thomas always vociferously denied that there was any conscious imitation of Eliot in his poems and also played down all subconscious connections. However, Daniel Jones—Thomas' childhood friend—has stated that Thomas was greatly affected by “modern” poetry from an early age<sup>1</sup> and indeed there are sufficient references to Eliot in Thomas' early poetry to make the connection apparent.

Thomas himself held a strongly ambivalent attitude towards Eliot referring to him on one occasion as “Pope” Eliot and on another contributing the esoteric information that T.S. Eliot was almost “toilets” backwards. However, in his personal dealings with Eliot, Thomas was always the respectful admirer. Thus, in May 1951 Thomas could write to Eliot:

Very many thanks for your letter and your cheque. It was extremely kind of you, and the cheque helped to ease my difficulties here...I was anyway writing to the best poet I know and not to a supposedly monied person.<sup>2</sup>

To what extent this esteem was the product of Eliot's practical support it would be impossible to say. At any rate, there is little need to doubt that Thomas possessed a hearty respect for Eliot: even if this respect was, on occasions, diluted by envy of Eliot's comfortable position and a distaste for his (in Thomas' opinion) too intellectual approach to the writing of poetry.

On the whole, it would probably be fair to say that most of Thomas' poetry is un-Eliotic in character. The importance of Eliot, however, as an early influence later assimilated into a mature and individual voice, should not be underestimated. This mature voice was capable, on occasions, of hitting some of the most profound lyrical notes heard in the twentieth-century and, while a huge bulk of would-be profound poems indisputably sinks Thomas' claims to be a major poet or even an acceptable minor one (in the sense that, say, Andrew Marvell might be considered a minor poet), there can be little doubt that a handful of lyrics like "Fernhill" and "The Force That Through the Green Fuse Drives the Flower" will be popular anthology pieces for long years to come. In perhaps ten poems Thomas achieved a poetic intensity beyond the very best of many of his smart intellectual contemporaries like Auden and Spender (though Auden's total corpus of work is far more consistent than Thomas').

It was the publication of "Light Breaks Where No Sun Shines" in *The Listener* in 1935 that first brought Thomas to Eliot's attention. On reading the poem Eliot, who was at the time editing *The Criterion*, sent Thomas a letter. In this early poem (for all its promise) Eliot must have recognized a few echoes from his own early verse—and even more direct references to his essay on "The Metaphysical Poets".

Light breaks on secret lots  
On tips of thought where thoughts smell in the rain  
When logics die,  
The secret of the soil grows through the eye,  
And blood jumps in the sun;  
Above the waste allotments the dawn halts.

This conjures up definite (if vague) linguistic memories of Eliot's "Preludes" from *Prufrock and other Observations*:

And now a gusty shower wraps  
The grimy scraps  
Of withered leaves about your feet  
And newspapers from vacant lots.  
(Prelude I)

And also:

Wipe your hand across your mouth, and laugh  
The worlds revolve like ancient women  
Gathering fuel in vacant lots.  
(Prelude IV)

Perhaps more interesting than this linguistic similarity, there seems to be in Thomas' poem a direct criticism of Eliot's vision of the modern poet with his intellect at the tips of his senses. Thomas, in the quoted passage, appears to be saying that poetry written through the intellect will not survive due to its lack of connection with the vital and emotional needs of ordinary people. It is rather ironic that this—in some ways rather immature and enervate—poetic assault on Eliot's critical ideas should contain a certain amount of linguistic indebtedness to Eliot's early verse.

Raymond Stephens in *Dylan Thomas New Critical Essays* has made some interesting points concerning Thomas' implicit criticism of Eliot's too intellectual approach to life in the poem "In My Craft Or Sullen Art".

These lovers “their arms/Round the griefs of the age” mock those other poets who deride the timeless subject of human sexual love, as irrelevant to the political needs of the time...or withdraw from its demands into attitudes of emotional sterility, like presumably the Eliot of *The Waste Land*.<sup>3</sup>

In spite of this lack of intellectual sympathy between the two poets, there yet remains quite a number of linguistic references to Eliot’s poetry in Thomas’ early verse. In “Out of the Sighs” the following lines occur:

After such fighting as the weakest know

There’s more than dying.

This can be interestingly compared with a line from Eliot’s 1920 poem, “Gerontion”:

After such knowledge what forgiveness?

The 1935 poem “Should Lanterns Shine” originally concluded with the following couplet:

Regard the moon it hangs above the lawn.

Regard the lawn it lies beneath the moon.

These lines were omitted on the advice of Vernon Watkins,<sup>4</sup> and indeed their derivative nature is very apparent. They represent a rather ineffectual echo of Eliot’s “Rhapsody on a Windy Night”:

Regard that woman

Who hesitates toward you in the light of the door

Which opens on her like a grin.

And, more specifically:

Regard the moon

La lune ne gard aucune rancune

Even though these Eliotic echoes (never particularly obvious or pronounced) were later assimilated into a mature style, the odd fairly direct reference did continue to crop up even in Thomas' later years. For example the line: "The starfish, the horseshoe crab, the whale's backbone from the first part of Eliot's "Dry Salvages" is brought to mind in the seventh stanza of Thomas' "Poem On His Birthday":

There he might wander bare  
With the spirits of the horseshoe bay  
Or the stars' seashore dead,  
Marrow of eagles, the roots of whales  
And wishbones of wild geese.

Although Thomas was an extremely original and idiosyncratic artist, the influence of T.S. Eliot did reflect itself in his early poetry both linguistically and intellectually. However, the creative sensibilities of these two poets were always very different and the fact that, in spite of this, there remain so many references to Eliot's poetry and ideas in Thomas' work of the nineteen-thirties, is indicative of just how very pervasive Eliot's influence was throughout the decade.

## **PART TWO: EVELYN WAUGH**



## CHAPTER ONE: DECLINE AND FALL

Evelyn Waugh's first novel, *Decline and Fall*, was first published in 1928 by Chapman and Hall. John Betjeman has spoken of his reactions on first reading the novel: "when I read the book it seemed to me so rockingly funny that nothing else would seem funny again."<sup>1</sup>

This remark of Betjeman's emphasizes something fundamental about Waugh's first three novels: they are all written primarily to entertain. In the early Waugh, all is grist to the satirist's mill and it would be most unwise to insist too heavy-handedly upon latent messages and statements of belief. However having said this in order to preserve the correct sense of perspective, it is perfectly apparent that there are signs, in these first three novels, of the serious channels Waugh's mind was already beginning to work along.

On this level of serious intent there is a pronounced affinity with the poet, T.S. Eliot: an affinity which must become apparent in any close examination of the work of these two writers. However, the real connections which exist between early Waugh and the early Eliot are not so tenuous as would be suggested by a similar set of personal beliefs lying behind very different artistic structures. Even in terms of expression and artistic sensibility there are similarities. And this finally gives a greater cogency and coherence to the similarities in belief and outlook.

In Eliot's 1920 poems, the literary world had been introduced to Eliot's "Sweeney"—or the everyman of the contemporary wasteland.

Apeneck Sweeney spreads his knees

Letting his arms hang down to laugh,

The zebra stripes along his jaw

Swelling to maculate giraffe.

In *Decline and Fall*, Waugh gives the following description of the members of the Welsh silver band that is to play on the occasion of the Llanaba school sports day:

Ten men of revolting appearance were approaching from the drive. They were low of brow crafty of eye and crooked of limb. They advanced huddled together with the loping tread of wolves, peering about them furtively as they came as though in constant terror of ambush; they slavered at their mouths, which hung loosely over their receding chins, while each clutched under his ape-like arm a burden of curious and unaccountable shape.<sup>2</sup>

These characters may lack something of Sweeney's charm, but it is significant that whenever Waugh deals with common men performing common functions (be it prison warders, customs officers or policemen) there is a uniform tendency to portray them as completely ignorant of all civilized virtues. They are comic and grotesque figures, attempting to assume a responsibility they do not have the aptitude and education to bear.

A little later, there is a comic conversation between Lady Circumference, Dr. Fagan and his daughter which puts one in mind (once again) of Eliot's *Ara Vos Prec* poems.

"Now how did your calceolarias do last year?"

"I really have no idea" said the doctor.

"Flossie, how did our calceolarias do?"

"Lovely", said Flossie.<sup>3</sup>

Here there is the same attempt to squeeze comic mileage out of a sesquipedalian word that is so typical of Eliot's stanzaic poems: perhaps the most famous example being the neologistic "Polyphiloprogenitive" from "Mr. Eliot's Sunday Morning Service".

In the third chapter of the second part of *Decline and Fall* Waugh includes a paragraph very reminiscent of Eliot's "Portrait of a Lady". Sir Humphrey Maltravers, Minister of Transportation, has just arrived at Margot Beste-Chetwynde's house and is telling Paul something of his background:

As he spoke the clipped yews seemed to grow grey with the soot of the slums, and the panatrophe in the distance took on the gay regularity of a barrel organ heard up a tenement staircase.<sup>4</sup>

Although the context is in some ways rather different, the dreamy mood and specific language used is definitely reminiscent of the following passage from "Portrait of a Lady":

I keep my countenance  
I remain self-possessed  
Except when a street piano, mechanical and tired  
Reiterates some worn-out common song  
With the smell of hyacinths across the garden  
Recalling things that other people have desired.

And also:

Well. And what if she should die some afternoon,  
Afternoon grey and smoky, evening yellow and rose;  
Should die and leave me sitting pen in hand  
With the smoke coming down above the housetops.

A further connection with one of Eliot's early poems comes when Paul and Margot prepare to break the news of their impending marriage to Peter Beste-Chetwynde.

They found Peter in the dining room eating a peach at the sideboard.  
"Hullo, you two," he said.<sup>5</sup>

This connects very directly with Prufrock's longing to appear more bold:

Shall I part my hair behind? Do I dare to eat a peach?

I shall wear white flannel trousers, and walk upon the beach.

An area of profound similarity between Waugh and early Eliot, well-illustrated in *Decline and Fall*, resides in their mutual emphasis upon a sense of the living tradition of literature: the way in which past literature can affect and improve contemporary literature. In Eliot's *Waste Land* this gives rise to an unprecedented allusive technique, only partly elucidated by the accompanying notes. For Waugh too, the sense of a living tradition continually creating and recreating itself through literature, is crucial.

Christopher Sykes in *Evelyn Waugh: a Biography* has indicated certain similarities between the Waugh of *Decline and Fall* and a number of nineteenth and twentieth century writers, including Charles Dickens, Oscar Wilde, Walter Pater and Ronald Firbank. Sykes has the following to say about—a most—surprising propinquity with George Bernard Shaw:

Mrs. Beste-Chetwynde's situation and her efficiency when selecting personnel for her chain of brothels...(strikes one)...as a farcical version of Mrs. Warren's profession by Bernard Shaw.<sup>6</sup>

The odd reference to Shakespeare in *Decline and Fall* should also not be overlooked. The leader of the Llanaba school sports band is rather reminiscent of Fluellen (from *Henry V*) in his long-winded Welsh:

"We are the silver band the Lord bless and keep you", said the station-master in one breath, "the band that no one could best whatsoever but two indeed in the Eisteddfod that for all North Wales was look you."<sup>7</sup>

Waugh shared with Eliot a belief concerning the growing decadence and emptiness of modern life due to the decline of cultural and religious beliefs. In *Decline and Fall* this portrayal

of a falling away in cultural and social standards is fairly muted due to Waugh's central satirical concern. However it is present, and we find perhaps the most direct statement of an earlier, more idyllic society in the chapter entitled "Pervigilium Veneris" when Paul Pennyfeather and Peter Beste-Chetwynde are driving towards Margot's new home:

The temperate April sunlight fell through the budding chestnuts and revealed between their trunks green glimpses of parkland and the distant radiance of a lake. "English Spring" thought Paul. "In the dreaming ancestral beauty of the English country." Surely, he thought, these great chestnuts in the morning stood for something enduring and serene in a world that had lost its reason and would so stand when the chaos and confusion were forgotten? And surely it was the spirit of William Morris that whispered to him in Margot Beste-Chetwynde's motor-car about seed-time and harvest, the superb succession of the seasons, the harmonious interdependence of rich and poor, of dignity, innocence and tradition.

This reverie is abruptly broken by the travelers' first sight of Margot's new home:

Golly," said Beste-Chetwynde. "Mamma has done herself proud this time."<sup>8</sup>

Margot Beste-Chetwynde's home

was called King's Thursday and stood on the place which since the reign of Bloody Mary had been the seat of the Earls of Pastmaster...King's Thursday had been empty for two years when Margot Beste-Chetwynde bought it.<sup>9</sup>

The iconoclastic Professor Otto Silenus—the man who believes Greek architecture to be "unspeakably ugly"—is hired to bring King's Thursday into the modern world according to principles made plain in the first chapter of part two:

"The problem of architecture as I see it," he told a journalist..."is the elimination of the human element from the consideration of form. The only perfect building must be the factory, because that is built to house machines not men."<sup>10</sup>

Other manifestations of this cultural decline Waugh observed in contemporary society are to be seen in Dr. Fagan's sale of Llanaba Castle to a cinema company, and the grisly fantasies of the demented "lion of the Lord's elect" who saws Mr. Prendergast's head off:

presumably affected by the sort of ghastly murder stories, narrated by the daily papers in terrifying detail, which hold such an influence over the minds of Sweeney and his friends in Eliot's "Sweeney Agonistes":

Sweeney: I knew a man once did a girl in.

Any man might do a girl in.

The connections between Sweeney and Waugh's red-haired convict are quite apparent. In chapter three of part three, Waugh describes Paul's initial conversation with his fellow prisoner:

"Have they given you an interesting library book?"

"Lady Almina's Secret," said the lion of the Lord's elect. "Pretty soft stuff, old-fashioned too. But I keep reading the Bible. There's a lot of killing in that."

"Dear me, you seem to think about killing a great deal."

"I do. It's my mission you see," said the big man simply.<sup>11</sup>

The actual report of Mr. Prendergast's death among the convicts once again puts one in mind of Sweeney:

"O God our help in ages past," sang Paul

"Where's Prendergast today?"

"What aint you 'eard 'e's been done in."

"And our eternal home."

"Old Prendy went to see a chap

What said he'd seen a ghost;

Well, he was dippy and he'd got

A mallet and a saw."

“Who let the madman have the things?”

“The Governor; who d’you think?”

He asked to be a carpenter,

He sawed off Prendy’s head.”<sup>12</sup>

While this is, of course, extremely funny, it is also suggestive of Waugh’s own convictions: his belief in the profound decline in cultural and ethical standards which had taken place in the modern world producing an all-pervasive emptiness, hollowness and viciousness in everything. In fact it is productive of the spiritual torpor so chillingly portrayed at the beginning of *The Waste Land*, where life itself cries out for death:

April is the cruelest month, breeding

Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing

Memory and desire, stirring

Dull roots with spring rain.

Winter kept us warm, covering

Earth in forgetful snow, feeding

A little life with dried tubers.

In this spiritual wasteland where all meaningful standards and values have been rejected, there can be no adequate communication between people. Words themselves break down. In *Decline and Fall*, this is illustrated by Margot’s visit to Paul in jail.

“It was nice of you to come,” said Paul.

“I’ve decided something rather important,” said Margot, “just this minute. I am going to be married quite soon to Maltravers. I’m sorry but I am”.

“I suppose it’s because I look so awful?” said Paul.

“No it’s just everything. It’s that too, in a way, but not the way you mean Paul...It’s just how things are going to happen. Oh dear how difficult it is to say anything.”<sup>13</sup>

Sweeney too experiences the same difficulty in expressing anything at all meaningful through language in the world in which he lives.

I gotta use words when I talk to you

But if you understand or if you don’t

That’s nothing to me and nothing to you.

In this context of human alienation from language and each other due to the decline of shared cultural standards, it may be thought that the sex act is the only meaningful human activity left. However, without a context of beliefs, within which the act can happen, it can be no more than the coupling of brutes, totally lacking in any sense of spiritual union. In *Decline and Fall* sex is portrayed as a rather tired game, and Paul’s evening with Margot leaves both as uncommitted and vacuous as ever. As for Eliot’s Sweeney and Doris, the sexual act in the spiritual Wasteland can only, in the final analysis, be boring.

In the absurd, meaningless world of *Decline and Fall*, perhaps Paul’s arranged death can be seen as serving some kind of emblematic function. All people who live and attempt to love in this environment, are literally living a life-in-death. It is left to Professor Silenus (surprisingly enough) to sum up and throw a little light on a possible form of escape. One may detect in his words a surprising similarity to Eliot’s concept of the still point of the turning world, taken from Aristotle and Dante.

“...Shall I tell you about life?”

“Yes do,” said Paul politely.

“Well, it’s like the big wheel at Luna Park. Have you seen the big wheel?”

“No, I’m afraid not.”



“You pay five francs and go into a room with tiers of seats all round, and in the centre the floor is made of a great disc of polished wood that revolves quickly. At first you sit down and watch the others. They are all trying to sit in the wheel, and they keep getting flung off, and that makes them laugh, and you laugh too. It’s great fun.”

“I don’t think that sounds very much like life,” said Paul rather sadly.

“Oh, but it is, though. You see the nearer you can get to the hub of the wheel the slower it is moving and the easier it is to stay on...Of course at the very centre there’s a point completely at rest, if one could only find it.”<sup>14</sup>

In order to continue this tracing of Waugh’s early debt to (and natural empathy with)

Eliot, it is necessary to now pass on to Waugh’s second novel, *Vile Bodies*.

## CHAPTER TWO: VILE BODIES

Waugh's second novel, *Vile Bodies*, exhibits in a much more direct way than *Decline and Fall*, the author's growing fears concerning the decline and disappearance of inherited cultural standards. It is this sense of a growing discontinuity with the past tradition, together with the chaos, cosmic boredom and anarchy attending the disintegration, that is one of Waugh's most central concerns in *Vile Bodies*.

Frederick J. Stopp in *Evelyn Waugh: Portrait of an Artist*, has pointed out that in his portrayal of the Bright Young People, Waugh reflected very accurately the intrigues of the "Society Racket":

the attempt by the newly rich society of the Archie Schwert's to gatecrash the barriers of the old; the degeneracy of the offspring of the older generation of Balcairns, Throbbings, Blackwaters and Chasms; the eccentricity of Colonel Blount, who in letting out Doubting Hall to the Wonderfilm Company of Great Britain puts on the biggest charade of the whole book.<sup>1</sup>

In other words, one of Waugh's most serious concerns in *Vile Bodies* is to exhibit the demise of standards inherited from a living past. Tradition is openly flouted, and the result is the rise of a new barbarism. This is brought out particularly well in chapter two of the novel when Fenwick Symes attempts to pass through customs.

It was some time before Adam could get attended to.  
"I've nothing but some very old clothes and some books," he said.  
But here he showed himself deficient in tact, for the man's casual air disappeared in a flash.  
"Books eh?" he said. "And what sort of books may I ask?"  
"Look for yourself."  
"Thank you, that's just what I mean to do. Books indeed."<sup>2</sup>

The Customs Officer confiscates a book on Economics which “comes under subversive propaganda” and also deprives Adam of his copy of Dante. Finally he makes it plain that he intends to burn Adam’s Autobiography.

“...But as for this autobiography that’s just downright dirt, and we burns that straight away see.”

“But good heavens, there isn’t a word in the book—you must be misinterpreting it.”

“Not so much of it. I knows dirt when I sees it or I shouldn’t be where I am today.”<sup>3</sup>

Of course, for Waugh this is precisely true. It is only by a complete lack of cultivation that in the new state of things a man can hope to prosper.

The failure of words, or more precisely the way in which words (the tools of poets, playwrights and novelists) have become rotten in the new society, is emphasized strongly throughout the novel by the importance attached to malicious gossip by the press—and also by the way important events are subordinated to the doings of the fourth and fifth rate.

When Balcairn telephones his last “bogus” story through to the Daily Excess:

The sub-editors began ruthlessly cutting and scrapping; they suppressed important political announcements, garbled the evidence at a murder trial, reduced the dramatic criticism to one caustic paragraph, to make room for Simon’s story.<sup>4</sup>

This emphasis of Waugh’s on the decline and disappearance of inherited cultural standards together with the corruption of language, which inevitably attends, is also a most typical concern of T.S. Eliot’s. Eliot had come to believe that the decline of the “one word” handed down from generation to generation and interpreted in harmonious words, had resulted in the vacuity and aimlessness of the modern age.

In “Mr. Eliot’s Sunday Morning Service”, Eliot traces back the beginnings of the present malaise to the Greek philosopher Origen who, by an over-fertilization of the one Logos with Greek philosophy had produced an enervate falling away from accepted standards and spiritual veracities.

In the beginning was the Word

Superfotation of τὸ ἔν

And at the mensual turn of time

Produced enervate Origen.

Superfotation of the word had produced “enervate Origen” and, eventually, the spiritual crisis of the modern age where the one “Word” and the structured words we may use to describe it, have become so diffuse as to defy interpretation. In these circumstances, man has gradually lost his way and severed his connections with the living past. As the inheritance dies, creating physical torpor, so too does the precision and value of language. In this new corrupt world, there is no place for Adam’s copy of Dante. Language is now used mainly to describe the trivial doings of the smart set and to construct sensational stories out of the most horrendous occurrences.

Sweeney: Any man has to, needs to, wants to

Once in a lifetime, do a girl in.

Well he kept her there in a bath

With a gallon of Lysol in a bath.

Swarts: These fellows always get pinched in the end.

Sweeney: Excuse me, they don’t all get pinched in the end.

What about them bones on Epsom eath?

I seen that in the papers.

You seen it in the papers.

They *don't* all get pinched in the end.

It is not surprising in this world (where imprecision in the meaning of words is an inevitable consequence of anarchy of thought) if the very function of words as a means of human communication begins to break down. This is to say that as the ideas and values of an inherited tradition which gave meaning to man's life and actions is lost, so also is man's ability to formulate his ideas in a comprehensible manner to his fellows. The corruption of language is a natural consequence of the corruption of ideas and as a result, in the modern wasteland, man is unable to communicate on either the levels of thought or language.

Sexual frustration and indifference is used both by Waugh and by Eliot as a symbol of the all-pervading emptiness of modern life. For twentieth-century man, copulation would appear to be the only means of communication left. However the irony is that, apart from its context in an overall structure of values, even this most fundamental of human acts can provide no consolation or sustenance.

In *Vile Bodies* Adam seduces Nina in a hotel at Arundel, presumably hoping by this action finally to break beyond the banal, shallow mode of verbal communication which has typified their relationship throughout the novel. Predictably, the seduction is a failure, not succeeding in the aim of establishing a deeper level of human connection.

"Anyway you've had some fun out of it haven't you...or haven't you?"

"Haven't you?"

"My dear, I never hated anything so much in my life...still as long as you enjoyed it that's something."

"I say Nina" said Adam after sometime, "we shan't be able to get married after all."<sup>5</sup>

A little later Nina expresses her conviction that the sex act "made one feel very ill at first, and she doubted if it was worth it."

Just as it is impossible in Waugh's *Vile Bodies* for a physical attachment to become a consummation (in the sense of a condition of general harmony and oneness) so it is equally impossible in Eliot for Sweeney's sexual obsession to provide any genuine fulfillment.

Sweeney: Well that's life on a crocodile isle.

There's no telephones.

There's no gramophones

There's no motor cars

No two-seaters, no six-seaters,

No Citroen, no Rolls Royce.

Nothing to eat but the fruit as it grows.

Nothing to see but the palm trees one way

And the sea the other way,

Nothing to hear but the sound of the surf.

Nothing at all but three things.

Doris: What three things?

Sweeney: Birth and copulation and death.

That's all, that's all, that's all, that's all.

Birth and copulation and death.

Doris: I'd be bored.

Sweeney's picture of a purely instinctive life does not fill Doris with the excitement it is intended to. She is merely bored by Sweeney's reductionistic vision. In a world where there can be no other form of meaningful communication, the sex act is exalted as the one true form of communication. However, the paradox is that when ideas values and the language they are expressed in cease to be meaningful, the sex act does not remain as the only true form of communication left (as Adam and Sweeney would like to believe) but itself becomes mere copulation, and not the consummation the act might provide in a more comprehensible world.

In these circumstances, it is not surprising that both Nina and Adam in *Vile Bodies* and Eliot's Sweeney Agonistes finally despair of establishing any meaningful mode of communication. Language and sexuality can no longer work as ways of creating personal intimacy and spiritual transcendence, since the tradition and modes of thought which provided them with their significance have been allowed to slide into disuse.

Nina and Adam having failed to establish meaningful levels of communication through either language or sexuality brokenly attempt to word their frustration—and fail.

"Late that evening Nina said: "You don't seem to be enjoying yourself very much tonight."

"Sorry am I being a bore?"

"I think I shall go home."

"Yes."

"Adam darling, what's the matter?"

"I don't know—Nina do you ever feel that things simply can't go on much longer?"

"What d'you mean by things—us or everything?"

"Everything."

And a little later on:

“I’d give everything in the world for something different.”  
“Different from me or different from everything?”  
“Different from everything.....only I’ve got nothing...what’s the good of talking?”  
“Oh Adam my dearest...”  
“Yes?”  
“Nothing.”<sup>6</sup>

Sweeney in “Sweeney Agonistes” after the wanton sexuality of his earlier words, begins tacitly to acknowledge the narrowness and final meaninglessness of his existence; but Sweeney, too, is predictably unable to adequately “word” his despair:

Sweeney:      Death is life and life is death  
  
                    I gotta use words when I talk to you  
  
                    But if you understand or if you don’t  
  
                    That’s nothing to me and nothing to you.  
  
                    We all gotta do what we gotta do.  
  
                    We’re gonna sit here and have a tune  
  
                    We’re gonna stay and we’re gonna go  
  
                    And somebody’s gotta pay the rent.

This, then, is what “Birth and Copulation and Death” finally boils down to for both Waugh and Eliot: the living of a meaningless exterior existence where people merely go through the motions of living, while the inner life which (set in the context of spiritual and cultural values) may transform the mundane actions of the individual into something of lasting point, are denied.



### CHAPTER THREE: BLACK MISCHIEF

By the time Waugh came to write his third novel, *Black Mischief*, he had already found his own very individual voice, and the direct influence of T.S. Eliot was on the wane. However, while *Black Mischief* might not contain so many obvious parallels with Eliot's early work as *Decline and Fall* or *Vile Bodies* there are still, undoubtedly, connections—and sometimes these are quite obvious. The conversation between Seth "Emperor of Azania...Bachelor of the Arts of Oxford University" and his secretary, Ali, in Chapter One of *Black Mischief* is very reminiscent of "A Game of Chess" from *The Waste Land*. This is apparent when the two passages are quoted together:

"We should have heard."

"What has happened? Why don't you answer me?

Why have we heard nothing?"

"Who am I? I know nothing."<sup>1</sup>

And:

What is that noise?

The wind under the door.

What is that noise now? What is the wind doing?

Nothing again nothing.

Do

You know nothing? Do you see nothing? Do you remember

Nothing?

On a deeper level Waugh is, in *Black Mischief* (as in the first two novels), very close to Eliot in terms of a belief in the aimlessness and rootlessness of contemporary civilization. In *Black Mischief*, Waugh gives us a vision cloaked in satire of the savagery which must result when a society lacks the values and moral standards upon which civilization must be based. Of course, Azania has never possessed the values and moral principles from which the outer manifestations of civilization grow. In these circumstances, the imposition of the technological achievements of civilization can only produce a technocratic barbarism. Civilization, on the other hand, is something that develops over a long period of time when large groups of people come to share common moral standards and beliefs. Seth makes the mistake of thinking that the imposition of the outer technological manifestations of a modern industrial society can create a civilization. This is well-illustrated by Seth's words to General Connolly after the victory against Seyid.

"We are progress and the New Age. Nothing can stand in our way. Don't you see? The world is already ours it is our world now, because we are of the present. Seyid and his ramshackle band of brigands were the past. Dark barbarism. A cobweb in a garret; dead wood; a whisper echoing in a sunless cave. We are Light and Speed and Strength, Steel and Steam, Youth, Today and tomorrow."

The reality of the total absence of civilized moral standards among the Wanda and Sakuyu is reinforced by the eating of the rival chief, Seyid, and this (as we shall see) provides an important link for Waugh between uncivilized native barbarism and the growing savagery of Europe. To a great extent, Azania, with its "imposed" civilization acts as a symbol for modern Europe which—Waugh believed—was losing the principles and moral standards from which civilization had developed. With the decline of these cohesive standards all that remained were

the material advantages of a technological society and, to this extent, Azania and modern Europe were much the same.

Of course Eliot, like Waugh, possessed this vision of modern European civilization declining into chaos and savagery due to the dissolution of age old moral and religious bonds. In the first section of *The Waste Land* we hear of the charlatan medium Madame Sosostriis and the growing influence of uncivilized superstitions.

Madame Sosostriis, famous clairvoyante,  
Had a bad cold, nevertheless  
Is known to be the wisest woman in Europe.

Perhaps the most important consequence of this decline in cohesive moral standards is the alienation of one human being from another. Without a context of belief, there can be no genuine and caring relationship between people. There can only be sensual gratification of one kind or another. At this point it would be useful to cite some words of Eliot's from his essay on Dante:

A great deal of sentiment has been spilt upon idealizing the reciprocal feelings of man and woman towards each other...this sentiment ignoring the fact that the love of man and woman...is only explained and made reasonable by the higher love, or else is simply the coupling of animals.<sup>3</sup>

The kind of empty sexuality which Eliot is here talking about is well-represented in *Black Mischief* by the enervate relationships between William and Prudence and, later, Basil and Prudence. Waugh, like Eliot, asserts that without an accepted body of moral standards there can be no possibility of genuine and meaningful communication between people. There can be only an empty sensual or sexual engagement of one kind or another. Consequently, when Basil expresses his wish to eat Prudence, Waugh is indicating the similarity which exists between

African savagery and the new European savagery due to the decline of civilized standards. This point is forced home with great emphasis later in the novel when Basil is actually granted his wish and, unknowingly, eats Prudence.

“But the white woman. Where is she?”

But the headman was lapsing into a coma. He said “Pretty” again and turned up sightless eyes.

Basil shook him silently. “Speak, you old fool. Where is the white woman?”

The headman grunted and stirred: then a flicker of consciousness revived in him. He raised his head.

“The white woman? Why here”, he patted his distended paunch. “You and I and the big chiefs—we have just eaten her.”<sup>4</sup>

This manifestation of modern European savagery is amazingly close to what is expressed in a conversation between Eliot’s Sweeney and Doris:

Sweeney: I’ll carry you off

To a cannibal isle.

Doris: You’ll be the cannibal.

Sweeney: You’ll be the missionary.

You’ll be my little seven stone missionary.

I’ll gobble you up. I’ll be the cannibal.

Doris: You’ll carry me off to a cannibal isle?

Sweeney: I’ll be the cannibal

Doris: I’ll be the missionary

I’ll convert you.

Sweeney: I’ll convert *you*

Into a stew

A nice little, white little, missionary stew.

Doris:            You wouldn't eat me?

Sweeney:        Yes I'd eat you.

In a sense Prudence's grisly end is the logical culmination of her banal and meaningless relationships with William and Basil which have contained no genuine affection or love, but only a bare minimum of sensual gratification. On the whole, the reader is struck by the sheer empty boredom of these relationships—the sense of merely going through the motions. Even the characters themselves are consciously aware of an all-encompassing tedium—as is illustrated by William's response to Prudence's new relationship with Basil.

“What you don't seem to see is that it's pretty dim for me, floundering about half the day, I mean, in a dust heap with two ponies while you neck with the chap who's cut me out?

*William* don't be coarse. And anyway, 'cut you out' nothing. You had me all to yourself for six months and weren't you just bored blue with it?

“Well I dare say he'll be bored soon.”<sup>5</sup>

This total lack of any genuine concern, or love, in male and female relationships, highlights the decline of the contexts of beliefs which Waugh believed to be absolutely necessary to any true form of meaningful communication. More or less the same point is made by Eliot in the third section of *The Waste Land* which portrays the meaningless sexual coupling of a secretary and a house agent's clerk.

The time is now propitious as he guesses

The meal is ended, she is bored and tired,

Endeavours to engage her in caresses

Which still are unreproved, if undesired,

Flushed and decided, he assaults at once;

Exploring hands encounter no defence;

His vanity requires no response,  
And makes a welcome of indifference.

Perhaps the greatest irony of *Black Mischief* is that Seth should see in Basil Seal the representative of an age old English civilization which he hopes to impose on Azania, unaware that Basil is in reality the representative of a new English barbarism—and is consequently a symbol of the basic similarities between modern English society and Azania. In both cases, a surface veneer of culture hides endemic savagery.

The essential similarities which have come to exist between England and Azania are emphasized by Basil's attitude to the modernization of the country.

"You know," he added reflectively we've got a much easier job now than we should have had fifty years ago. If we'd had to modernize a country then it would have meant constitutional monarchy, bi-cameral legislature, proportional representation, women's suffrage, independent judicature, freedom of the press, referendum...."

"What is all that"? asked the Emperor.

"Just a few ideas that have ceased to be modern."<sup>6</sup>

In *Black Mischief* Azania stands as a great symbol for the decay of western society which (Waugh believed) had very largely lost the body of principles and beliefs which had earlier distinguished civilization from barbarism, thus making possible the whole context of humane civilized life. It is apparent that this concern was very close to Eliot's essential message in much of his early poetry. And, as we have seen, the form of expression is sometimes strikingly similar.

After *Black Mischief* direct connections with Eliot in terms of art and expression became less frequent in Waugh's work (though on the theoretical plane, the two men remained close). However, Waugh was always to be more completely traditional in his context of beliefs than the more radically conservative Eliot.

## CONCLUSION

There is little left for me to say by way of a conclusion. The main thrust of my endeavor has been to show in as concrete way as possible the diverse ways in which the poetry of T.S. Eliot acted as a formative influence on the literary decade of the nineteen-thirties.

Eliot's influence on the nineteen-thirties was not confined merely to poetry or even creative literature as a whole. As the decade wore on, Eliot's most famous poem *The Waste Land* came more and more to be seen as the definitive statement on the post First World War world. The title of Eliot's poem became almost a synonym for cultural decline and the political anxieties of the time. Of course each individual, or group of individuals, viewed *The Waste Land* in the light of their own special concerns. The Marxists saw Eliot's poem as essentially anti-capitalist and anti-bourgeois, while the traditionalists viewed it as a plea for sanity in an increasingly incomprehensible world. No doubt the second interpretation was more in line with Eliot's own purpose. However, if one criterion of great art is its inexhaustibility of meaning, then Eliot's *Waste Land* certainly fulfils this requirement. Since the first publication of this poem in 1922 it has spawned more critical debate than almost any other work of the modern era. *The Waste Land* has become, in a fundamental sense, a part of our contemporary *zeitgeist*.

In the present work I have rarely touched upon the influence of Eliot's criticism on the decade of the nineteen-thirties and beyond. Essentially, this is an area of enquiry which lies outside the scope of my own special concerns. However, it is a fundamental fact that Eliot's criticism had a profound influence on the whole of the twentieth-century English literary tradition. W.W. Robson in his book *Modern English Literature* has the following to say concerning this influence:

Many of his (Eliot's) critical dicta achieved a world-wide fame. His taste for Dante, for the metaphysical poets, for French symbolist poetry, his comparative distaste for Milton and for much nineteenth-century poetry, shaped the opinion of a whole generation, and left a lasting mark on school curricula and university syllabuses.<sup>1</sup>

A.C. Ward in *The Longman Companion to Twentieth Century Literature* is even more explicit about the effect of Eliot's criticism and poetry on the twentieth-century.

The widespread acceptance of Eliot as a superlatively great poet and great critic was unparalleled; as a literary arbiter had been equaled in modern times only by Samuel Johnson in the eighteenth-century...Though personally modest and no contriver of his own reputation, as a critic he was not without intellectual arrogance; and though as a poet he profoundly influenced a whole generation of writers, only posterity will be competent to judge whether Eliot led English poetry into productive new territory or a cul-de-sac.<sup>2</sup>

Throughout the present work I have attempted to show the immensely wide and diverse ways in which Eliot's poetry influenced British writers of creative English through the decade of the nineteen-thirties. During the nineteen-twenties, Eliot had been considered a controversial and avant-garde figure. By the nineteen-forties he had conquered the literary establishment and was widely accepted as the leading writer of his age. In other words, it was during the decade of the nineteen-thirties that the process of acceptance took place: and in the first instance, this was largely due to the effect of Eliot's work on creative artists who had been affected and influenced by him. The literary establishment might sneer, but Eliot's profound originality was almost immediately perceived by many writers of the time.

It is my own belief that Eliot's influence on the twentieth-century poetic tradition and beyond has been a profoundly fertile one. I believe that Eliot's shaping influence can be clearly traced through writers of the nineteen-thirties like Auden, Empson and Waugh to such late twentieth-century writers as Philip Larkin, Thom Gunn and Kingsley Amis (particularly in his



poetry). This influence has, of course, been extremely diffuse. Perhaps it can best be summed up as a belief in reason, craftsmanship and the ability of man to word coherently, gracefully and on occasions beautifully, his very deepest passions and convictions: even if it is often necessary to have recourse to an ironic mode of expression in order to achieve this.

In what ways Eliot's influence will continue to make itself felt in the twenty-first-century—which, currently at least, places optimal value on a whole multiplicity of (often mutually exclusive) theories of being and the written word--must remain a matter for some serious conjecture.

## NOTES

### Introduction

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